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“The Most Important Book on My Bookshelf…”: The Writer as Reader

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Panel: Most Important Book . . . (II)

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When I was nine years old, I read a random short novel by Russian writer Ivan Turgenev called "Notes of the Hunter." I wanted to read any interesting story in the style of action, or maybe horror films, but I left dangerously confused because the story was not about hunting. It was my first reaction to literature. I was very small, but I understood that literature is not simply funny stories, is a puzzle, a secret, a joke that I was waiting for.

I'm indebted to only books. They bear the responsibility for why I became the writer. After Jules Verne's and Mark Twain's funny heroes, the first book that I really loved in my childhood was a collection of short stories by the Soviet writer Pavel Bajov "Malakhit Box." Malakhit is gem of sharp green color, but I couldn't find the right name of this stone in English. The book was a remaking of magic tales of the Uralic-Siberian people. Except for the last several stories—which were dedicated to Lenin and the Communist Revolution—the whole book seemed good and true, because the stories are drawn from folk magic tales.

Here, first, I must talk about the books that influenced me most, and more importantly, the books that helped me to become a writer. Most Mongolian poets write their first poems as teenagers. Usually, their first poems are about love. This practice is almost law for Mongolians. I was no different. My first love was my classmate; I dedicated about three thick notebooks of poems to her. And from my thirteenth year, in love, until my nineteenth year, I read only poetry. Then, my poems were child's works. Without the opportunity to read the poems of two Russian poets, Osip Mandelshtam and George Ivanov, I may even now be writing those "white" poems. One of George Ivanov's last poetry books, "Roses," in particular, finally helped me to understand what real poetry is. I still have this book on my desk. The book was published in 1931 in Paris, because the author had emigrated from Russia after the October Revolution. He died in France in an even worse condition. My favorite poets were always interchangeable: at one time, Emily Dickinson, another time Chinese Tan Dynasty classicist Bai Ju Yi, another time Paul Celan, and so on. But my love for George Ivanov's "Roses" is forever in my mind.

The second book that influenced me was "The Bear" by William Faulkner. The confusion and waiting I felt from when I was nine years old ultimately was satisfied only after reading this short novel. I finally understood what real prose is. It was 17 years ago, but still I see myself in a dream instead of that little boy Isaac McCaslin, still I feel in my heart a pain because of that great wild animal named Old Ben and that poor Indian chief named is Sam Fathers.

After Faulkner entered my life, "The Stranger" by Camus, "The Tartar Desert" by Dino Buzzati, "Dubliners" by Joyce, "The God's Script" and other kaleidoscope stories by Borges followed…And "The Master and Margarita" by Mikhail Bulgakov, my greatest envy!

Lots of books made me happy. For example, I have nothing with which to compare my ancient happiness drawn from Michel de Montaigne's essays. I collect copies of different publications of

Montaigne in Russian and English. They were used for my own translation of Montaigne into Mongolian. That Mongolian Montaigne was published in 2003.

Now I'm far away from my bookshelves. But it's so nice to remember their arrangement, like a close friend's party. Every one of them is important to me. But here I want to speak about a book perfectly unknown for you, but really most important to me. This book is "The Secret History of the Mongols."

This historical novel or poetical non-fiction, I don't know how to describe it, was composed in 1242 on an island of the Mongolian river Kerlen. Other scholars argue that it was written in 1228. The History was written in the Uiguro-Mongolian script. This ancient Mongolian novel was translated into more than 40 languages. I know of at least three different translations into English.

This book is the most important documentation of Mongolian history. There is high-level writing about the ancestors of the Mongols; how that small nomadic tribe could unite all Central-Asian nomads, then half of the world, under one leader's control; what life is like among the steppe nomads; what made up their poetry and songs. The main purpose of the History was to record the everyday private lives of noble clan members, and especially the life of Chinggis Khan. (The Washington Post and Time Magazine named him their Man of the Millennium, describing him as "an apostle who embodies the half-civilized, half-savage duality of human race.")

I love this book not only for providing the great history of my people, but also because it is truly great writing in Mongolian. The composition of "The Secret History" is amazing by the standards of the 13th century. The book has 12 chapters. The first chapter is about all the ancestors of Chinggis Khan, including his father. The chapter's narrative style is analogous to the style of the Old Testament: from grandfather to father, from son to grandson. . . Also included are many mystic and shamanic legends. But in the next chapters, when the story shifts to the author's "present time," these narrations come to seem half-fiction, half-nonfiction. After two or three chapters more, already in the author's day, in which the everyday life of Chinggis Khan is recorded, the novel becomes richer with poetic sayings and high-level philosophical aphorisms. By the way, Chinggis Khan was a poet himself, and many of his poems are preserved today. This comes as no surprise tp Mongolians, because at that time all Mongolians were shamanists, and every shaman and high spiritual figure was invariably a poet.

Because this novel is very long, I want to show only some of its poetic elements.
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Chinggis Khan's ninth-generation grandfather, Bodonchar, was no longer counted as a member of the family. He rode away from his clan: "If I'm to die, let me die. If I'm to live, let me live." He had with him only a horse and a female hawk. Several months later, one of his older brothers searched for him. He asked a group of people about his brother. They answered:

"It is not known where he spends the night. When the wind rises in the northwest, the feathers and down of the ducks and geese that his hawk catches scatter like snow and blow across here…

Good direction, isn't it?

*

Chinggis Khan's father stole his mother from her wedding, where she was awaiting another man. Part of that passage, from "The Secret History," explains:

> …After the escape of her groom, the young lady said: "My husband is one
> Whose hair has blown in the wind,
> Whose belly has never hungered in the wild land.
>
> What will now become of him?" Her two plaits were flung now across her back, now across her breast, as she threw herself backwards and forwards. "What is happening to me?" she cried. The Onon River churned and the forest echoed with the sound of her loud crying…

There is very interesting metaphor. Girls in Mongolia never cut their hair before marriage, plaiting it instead into ten or more braids. On marrying, they combined these plaits into two large braids hanging behind their ears. That sigh of Chinggis Khan's mother as one braid is catching on her breast, is the sigh of a woman missing her beloved. As for the other braid she threw backwards: "What is happening to me?" It signifies, "How can I live with one man while missing another?"

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"The Secret History" is too rich with beautiful poetry for this brief speech. I would need much more time to include them all. I'll end my speech with six lines of poetry. These lines were uttered by one soldier on the death of Chinggis Khan. I hope you will find in them one more example of Mongolian metaphor:

> You went as a wing of a flying hawk, oh my Lord!
> You went as a load of a tinkling cart, oh my Lord!
> You went as a wing of a frolicking martin, oh my Lord!
> You went as a load of a circling cart, oh my Lord!
> You went as a wing of a chirping bird, oh my Lord!
> You went as a load of a squeaking cart, oh my Lord!

To be a bird's wing is an abstraction, and to be baggage on a funeral cart is concrete. I have read many poems about someone's death, but never have I found reality and abstraction so perfectly united. This passage contains excellent poetic composition.

I have presented here only three poetic details from my most favorite book. I've probably read "The Secret History" 7-10 times. Perhaps, I'll read it again and again in my lifetime. Each time I reread it, I find new meaning. This, I think, is a sign of writing that is truly alive.